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UNCLAS PANAMA 000202

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: COUNTRY CLEARANCE GRANTED FOR PANAMA DESK OFFICER
THOMAS PIERCE

REF: STATE 15708

1. Embassy grants country clearance and welcomes Panama Desk Officer Thomas Pierce, who will visit Panama during January 31-February 4, 2005 for in-country orientation.

2. Embassy Control Officer for this visit is Political Officer Karen Covert, telephones: office (507) 207-7131, residence (507) 225-2850, cell (507) 616-3723; email: CovertKN@state.gov. PolOff Covert will be in touch with you about your schedule.

3. Hotel reservations have been made at the Miramar Intercontinental Hotel, telephone (507) 206-8888, and fax (507) 223-4891. Confirmation number is 218068. Embassy Motorpool and Control Officer will provide "meet and assist" at the airport upon arrival.

4. Use taxis for transportation between the Embassy and the hotel unless other arrangements are made. Taxis in Panama do not use meters and fares should be agreed upon in advance. Taxis are generally reliable within Panama City and cost less than 2 USD for most locations.

5. The American embassy in Panama has two principal locations, the Chancery on Avenida Balboa at Calle 37 and the Clayton Building on Demetrio Basilio Lakas Street (former Building 520, Clayton. Note: when taking a taxi to the Embassy, please be sure to specify the exact address where you intend to go. If your business is in the Chancery, you should ask to be taken to the Balboa Avenue location. The Consular Section, FCS, MGT, PD, and CIS (former INS) are located on Demetrio B. Lakas Street, Clayton. Taxi drivers have sometimes taken our visitors to the Clayton Building when in fact they want to go to the Chancery. The Embassy telephone number is: (country code-507) 207-7000, during duty hours. After duty hours the telephone number is (507) 207-7200.

6. U.S. currency is accepted in Panama and major credit cards are widely accepted. However, visitors are warned that large denomination bills (50 USD and larger) are often scrutinized carefully or refused due to counterfeiting fears.

7. During the May to December rainy season, Panama City experiences heavy rain most days, often with brief flooding of streets or walkways. During the rest of the year rains are less frequent. Temperatures are always warm. Travelers are advised to pack accordingly.

8. All official USG travelers to Panama should enter on passports with appropriate diplomatic or official visas.

9. Normally all travelers departing from Tocumen International must pay a \$20 user fee. However, officials accredited to the Embassy are exempt.

10. Security assessment: there is no specific information to indicate official or private American travelers to Panama are targeted by criminals or terrorists. Criminal statistics indicate a steady increase in drug use and related criminal activity to include robbery, assault, auto theft, larceny, and sexual assault. The emergence and establishment of youth gangs in specific areas of Panama City and Colon, is consistent with the proliferation of illegal weapons and related activity. Armed violence in the metropolitan areas is not uncommon and a curfew enacted for juveniles remains in place. Police checkpoints have become commonplace on weekends in Panama City and Colon. Based upon reported incidents, the high crime areas around Panama City are: Chorillo, Ancon, Curundu, Rio Abajo, Veracruz Beach, Panama Viejo and the Madden Dam overlook. In addition, U.S. citizens should exercise caution when visiting the campus of the University of Panama. Despite improved policing and more police officer visibility on the streets during business hours, urban and organized crime continue to be a major problem. The border region of Panama and Colombia, the Darien, has become increasingly unstable and violent due to narcotics trafficking and spillover from the Colombian civil conflict. All travel for official Americans to the area is restricted. Advice to American travelers: exercise good personal security practices and always be aware of your surrounding environment. Minimize the amount of cash, credit cards, jewelry and other personal

valuables you carry with you and avoid going out alone, particularly after dark. Choose restaurants and establishments that have adequate security. Radio taxis are safe and recommended. Contact the RSO to report any security-related incident. For updated security information, contact the U.S. Embassy's Consular Section.

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